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# Building the Scholarly Base of a Field: Reflections on 8 Years of the Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI)

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**Abstract:** The Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI) was begun in 2008 to stimulate the growth of a new generation of academics in archival education who are versed in contemporary issues and knowledgeable about their colleagues' work. The initiative nurtures and promotes state-of-the-art scholarship in archival science broadly conceived, and encourages curricular and pedagogical innovation in archival education. This paper reflects on its genesis and activities over the past eight years and points to its future.

## 1 Beginnings

My introduction to archives came in the mid-1980s when I entered the Master's program at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) intending to focus on online information brokering. I had been awarded a student assistantship to work with the American Library Association Archives at the UIUC Archives but really I had no idea about what I was getting myself into. I quickly discovered that the archival work was congenial to me because of my background: my experiences as an intern at Trinity College Dublin, my M. A. studies of Anglo Saxon and Old Icelandic texts, my summer work filing in a law office in my home town in Northern Ireland, and my interests in the possibilities afforded by emerging information technologies. Entranced by the "stuff" of the archives and the challenges of managing and describing such materials, I shifted my focus to archival science, and to archival automation in particular. From there grew a career that has taken me to many exciting and unexpected places intellectually and geographically.

My story is not different from those of many others who "fell into" and then fell in love with archives—people who either knew nothing at all about the world of

archives, or who had some vague notion but who came to appreciate the importance and potential of this eclectic and far-reaching field. Such stories speak, however, to the archival field's perpetual branding problem—what is its scope, what is there to study, and does anyone really pay attention to it? Even seasoned scholars in archival studies dread having to make an "elevator speech" that must succinctly describe what they do. The problem is further exacerbated by other fields with similar terms such as the computer, information, and data science communities, and critical and cultural studies scholars in the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

When I began my Master's program, there were only a few library and information science (LIS) and history programs in the United States that offered courses in *archival administration*, with those at the universities of Maryland, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Wayne State being among the most prominent. In those programs archival administration was frequently a lowly presence, taught largely by working practitioners. By the mid-1990s most of these programs had expanded into more robust specializations in *archival science*, *archival studies*, or *recordkeeping*. New specializations led by full-time academic faculty who had attained Doctoral degrees that were specifically focused on archival concerns were initiated at other universities such as the University of Pittsburgh, the University of California, Los Angeles, and Simmons College. The University of British Columbia implemented a Master's of Archival Science (MAS) degree and a few other North American universities have since followed suit.

The hiring of full-time archival academics integrated archival studies more systematically in broader departments and schools, increasing capacity to offer additional archival courses, supporting specialized academic advising, and also supervising Doctoral research. More recently many other universities have begun to offer archival courses (although those in iSchools and LIS programs have vastly outnumbered offerings in history departments, the traditional homes of such study).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Outside North America archival education may take place in such fields or also in those as diverse as knowledge management, heritage

The Society of American Archivists' *Directory of Archival Education* today lists 39 Master's programs in the United States offering archival education, 19 of which also offer doctorates, with several more in Canada. Nor is this expansion limited to North America—many other countries such as China and Korea have had similar programs. Archival specializations have been attracting record numbers of professional and Doctoral students. They have also become increasingly distinctive in their ethos and coverage. While the shifting labels applied to the field are somewhat indicative of the diversification and complexity of the field as well as the impact on it of technology and of various academic disciplines, a glance at some of the alignments being made between archival studies and other areas is even more so: digital humanities, heritage informatics, digital asset and digital media management, digital curatorship, data archiving, "studies" fields (such as gender and sexuality, ethnic, indigenous, memory, area, urban, labor), and health-care. At the same time, faculty and Doctoral students in archival studies have generated an impressive, rapidly growing, and wide-ranging body of research for and about the field (Gilliland and McKemmish; McKemmish and Gilliland).

Despite the positive developments of the 1990s and 2000s, there was a sense of isolation and frustration among archival academics, and a concern that these incremental developments were not sufficient to sustain the programs in the academy or to adequately support a field striving to cope with the implications of new technologies and mounting epistemological and ethical challenges to its theory and practice base. There were still few faculty in programs—often only one or two amid a host of colleagues who understood little of archival ideas or practice—and the programs were vulnerable if they lost faculty to retirement or recruitment elsewhere. Difficulties in identifying academics for full-time career positions who had doctorates and whose research and publication records were competitive with faculty in the same or other departments also limited expansion of academic programs.

Doctoral students often found themselves the only ones in their field in their academic units with interests in archival studies, and for various reasons some were in units that had no archival faculty at all. There was frustration that academic programming, peer-review processes, scholarly publication, and presentation venues

and funding priorities were unfamiliar with the interests, methods, and contexts of the archival field. There was frustration also that archival professional associations, while engaged in continuing education and professional certification, were not doing much to support the development of professional education and research in the academy, and in general they did not understand the realities with which faculty had to cope in developing education programs and building their research base.

A number of one-day forums were held by archival educators during this time at which these challenges were discussed. It was clear that what was needed was a mechanism that would simultaneously encourage the growth of a new cohort of future faculty and bring together existing faculty and Doctoral students to build a robust and rigorous academic education and research front for the field. Faculty from eight U.S. academic institutions (UCLA, Michigan, Pittsburgh, Maryland, Texas-Austin, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Wisconsin-Madison, and Simmons), took the lead, forming an unprecedented collaboration among programs with various outlooks and levels of maturation. With me as director and Elizabeth Yakel at the University of Michigan iSchool as co-director, we applied to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for a grant to support four years of week-long summer archival education and research institutes (AERIs) as well as competitive four-year Doctoral fellowships to support students attending one of the schools in the consortium. Our IMLS application was successful and we selected our first cohort of Doctoral fellows (we subsequently received a second grant that funded AERI until December 2015). The first AERI was held at UCLA in July 2009. It included presentations of research in process; workshops on methodology, curricular development, and technological issues; publication and grant-writing strategies; formal mentoring; socialization activities; tours of local sites and projects; and plenary sessions addressing infrastructure needs for archival education and research.

When we started the planning process for AERI 2009 we were unsure how many attendees we should anticipate. We had funding to support attendance by Doctoral students in American universities but we had no way of knowing how many there might be out there in different programs. International colleagues also asked if they could attend and perhaps bring their own students if they paid their own way. One program committee member remarked at the time that he would be astonished if we got 35 attendees. The eventual registration count was 71 faculty and Doctoral students. To keep registration costs as low as possible, we had decided from the outset that we would use dormitory and other facilities on the

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management, or even military science. Archivists may also be prepared in specialized schools that stand alone but have university or archives affiliations (such as the École des Chartes in France) or are run by national or state archives.

campus that would be hosting the institute. This allowed us to keep all attendees together over the week and draw on local expertise. It also allowed us to showcase state-of-the-art archival research to others on those campuses and for our hosts to showcase to AERI attendees what was special about their school. For every person there it was the first time that they had attended such an immersive event at which they could discuss in a sustained way issues directly in their own frames of reference. It was also the first time that many of the attendees had met each other or even discovered that there were others working in the same areas. This was intellectually stimulating and has since led to many trans-institutional and even trans-national research initiatives. It was also surprisingly affective and has nurtured a strong sense of cohort and collegiality in the years since the first AERI.

## 2 AERI: Building a Field

The goal of the Building the Future of Archival Education and Research Initiative has always been to stimulate the growth of a new generation of academics in archival education who are versed in contemporary issues and knowledgeable of the work being conducted by colleagues. The initiative seeks to nurture and promote the state-of-the-art in scholarship in Archival Science, broadly conceived, as well as to encourage curricular and pedagogical innovation in archival education across the United States and worldwide. ([www.aeri.website](http://www.aeri.website))

There are many aspects to building a field—some we anticipated from the outset and others that continue to unfold as AERI matures. A joint commitment to field-building and to working together as equals infuses the ethos of AERI. The institute is not just another conference and not just another place for attendees to network and advance their careers. It is a working meeting, a catalyst, an incubator, and a social space. Moreover, work continues in various workgroups between institutes. The ethos, although always an aspiration, was something that emerged in the first three years or so. One early challenge was that faculty and Doctoral students were not always accustomed to being in such close proximity, and senior faculty in particular sometimes viewed their roles to be exclusively as critics, mentors, and instructors. In time they too came to view AERI as a place to learn, engage in stimulating intellectual exchange, get feedback on their own research, and problem-solve. Today many collaborative and mentoring relationships flourish across institutions and ranks, and attendees bring their best work to each institute. Attendees also know that they may be able to learn about topics at institutes that are not covered in their own programs

such as particular research methodologies or theoretical frameworks. In the early years there were two groups of participants, North Americans and those who came from elsewhere. The single biggest preoccupation was with the North American tenure system and career development. Another was what initially appeared to be gulfs among critical, technological, and cultural/heritage and records research orientations. These preoccupations gradually dissipated through the growing emphasis on the broader goal of building a true international academic field, smart juxtapositions on the program that drew out common themes that were not immediately apparent between different strands of work, and the growing familiarity and friendships among those who returned to the institutes each year.

As already mentioned, plenary sessions at each institute addressed the infrastructure necessary to build education and scholarship in archival studies. Participants assessed the state of the field and possible future directions for AERI. The first institute at UCLA in 2009 tackled the issue of not having a ranking system for a burgeoning number of archival journals and how this was impeding the assessment of the quality of archival journals during peer or grant review. At that institute attendees endorsed the rigorous ranking exercise done by the Australian Research Council. Other issues with peer review have been addressed in part by encouraging the AERI community to serve as reviewers for conferences such as the iConference, funding agencies, and top journals. The increased knowledge about who is working in the field has also simplified the identification of peer reviewers for faculty promotions.

Diversifying cohorts coming through archival education, in professional and Doctoral programs, and finding ways to make curriculum culturally aware and inclusive were also identified as priorities from the start. At the first institute the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group was formed and over the next few months it produced an influential position paper published in the *American Archivist* (“Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group”). Although the institutes have attracted a diverse group of participants, it became clear that developing a “pipeline” into and through archival education and even through tenure would be essential. Hence AERI added two elements to the second IMLS-funded phase. First was the Emerging Archival Scholars Program (EASP), which recruits undergraduate and Master’s students from under-represented groups who may be interested in Doctoral studies and eventually faculty positions. Scholarships are awarded on a competitive basis and up to ten students each year are funded to attend the institute

at which they can see firsthand work in the field, meet Doctoral students and faculty from several schools, and participate in special sessions preparing them to apply to Doctoral programs. If they wish to return to the institute the following year, they may do so. Second was funding support to attend annual institutes and additional mentoring specifically targeting junior faculty since it had become clear that it was important to produce Doctoral graduates who were competitive for faculty positions. It was also seen that when they became new faculty, they still needed to understand curriculum development, online education, and the publication and grant-writing strategies that AERI and its institutes can provide. The pipeline approach does not end there, however, and AERI 2014, held at the University of Pittsburgh, introduced the first discussion for senior faculty on late-career and retirement planning.

Another issue that AERI has been pursuing has been how to increase knowledge about and access to the research literature in the field. This literature is being generated around the world in many languages, most notably English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Chinese, and across several disciplines. There is almost no translation taking place, much of the literature is not being indexed by services such as Scopus, and universities in many regions cannot afford to access major journals (and archivists may also be restricted to publishing only in journals purchased by their institutions or nations, or that are indexed by particular services). An AERI-sponsored study conducted by graduate students in the U.S. and China and led by Paul Conway, from the University of Michigan, examined the spread of the literature. Another AERI product is a major monograph with more than 40 essays on research methods and design in archival studies written by faculty and Doctoral students from around the world and published by Monash University Press; it will be available worldwide for download at no cost (Gilliland, McKemmish, and Lau). Each essay contains an extensive list of references that highlight an enormous range of literature and especially those texts that are particularly influential in various contexts and locations. Institute participants have also increasingly engaged in disseminating their own pre-prints, and taking advantage of university digital repositories, social media, and more *ad hoc* forms of distribution.

One other strategic initiative that should be mentioned is the AERI Grand Challenges initiative. The AERI community has determined that concerted transformative research and development relating to archival and recordkeeping imperatives, frameworks, processes, technologies, and standards can contribute in significant ways to

addressing many of society's most pressing grand challenges. In work that has been conducted so far in AERI addressing several selective areas where there is community expertise—Corporate Governance and Social Responsibility, Climate Change, Global Health, Human Rights and Social Justice, the Information Society, and Peace and Security—it has become apparent that there is a core set of recordkeeping/archival concerns that surface repeatedly in connection with several grand challenges, thus suggesting some particularly fertile areas in which concerted efforts of research and practice in the field might be transformative. These include cultural and community considerations relating to recordkeeping, archives, and memory; the role and use of records in supporting accountability, sustainability, decision-making, and program assessment; education and capacity building in archival and recordkeeping skills; best practices and standards development; compliance management; scalable systems and services infrastructure development; metadata implementation and their implications; promotion of open access to archives with an eye on privacy and security concerns/vulnerabilities; and, among these, perhaps of the highest priority, the promotion of global integration and accessibility of archival and recordkeeping systems and holdings (Gilliland).

### 3 Maturation and Moving Forward

AERI has fledged and is now maturing into a robust community with an extensive and significant body of scholarly work generated by its members. This work has been widely recognized by several awards from scholarly and professional organizations including the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), the iConference, and the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), and in several other humanities and social science fields. When it was started, AERI was conceived of as a four-year initiative. It was extended with further funding for another three years. At AERI 2015 at the University of Maryland, attendees decided that AERI remained essential to the field and should continue on a self-funding basis. Growing steadily from 71 attendees at the first AERI in 2009, AERI 2015 drew 150 attendees—66 senior and junior faculty, 74 students, and 10 researchers-in-practice. We saw 112 participants come from 34 U.S. universities, and 38 from universities in Canada, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. Over the years we have had attendance from nearly every continent. These figures illustrate how AERI has become central to the



development of graduate archival education and research being undertaken in the academy. Beyond IMLS funding AERI has also received considerable in-kind support from U. S. universities that have hosted annual institutes and it has identified hosts for the next five years, including at least two outside the U. S. AERI 2016 will be held in July 2016 at Kent State University and applications to attend are at capacity.

Until 2015, AERI was restricted to Doctoral students, faculty, and others teaching in areas germane to archival studies broadly conceived and to the EASP scholars. However there was considerable awareness that professionals are also doing research in practice and that this should also be encouraged, albeit without diluting the role that AERI has been playing in academic infrastructure building. In AERI 2015 applications were opened to scholars-in-practice and this is being continued at AERI, and professional Master's students doing research and being tracked towards Doctoral study are also able to apply. We are also keenly aware that despite our own diversity initiatives we have no provision for languages other than English at the institutes and we will need to address this. One other welcome shift indicating increasing disciplinary cross-fertilization that began in 2015 is a growing institute attendance by Doctoral students and faculty from humanities and social science fields that have been strongly influenced by the so-called "archival turn" but that have until recently had little contact with scholars in archival studies.

It has been a truly inspiring experience to work with so many dedicated and energetic colleagues and to watch those entering the field be excited and stepping up to lead it. Even a decade ago it would have been impossible to imagine how far the field would have come. I look forward to what will happen in the next decade.

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## Bionotes

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